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ABSTRACT

Arguments are advanced for the inclusion of Latin in predominantly black, inner-city junior and senior high schools. Discussion of Latin offerings in these schools centers on principal and administrator attitudes, teacher recruitment, and student interest. Ways in which Latin can contribute to English skills, professional training, college admission, and cultural education are suggested. (AF)

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Latin for the Disadvantaged

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☐ Much has been written and spoken about the generally depressed condition of the public schools of the inner city. Stress has been laid, *inter alia*, on the overcrowded classes, the lack of adequate teachers and materials, de facto segregation, the atmosphere of educational hopelessness, the poor conditions of the buildings, etc. It has been shown that the predominantly black urban schools compare very poorly with those of white suburbia. In all this discussion, too little attention has been called to the absence of Latin from so many of the inner-city schools. The "typical" suburban school district offers Latin in all its junior and senior highs. By contrast, Latin is almost totally absent in predominantly black senior highs. Latin flourishes in the suburbs, but languishes in the inner city.

Why is this so? The matter is somewhat complicated and I do not wish to oversimplify.

One reason is that some of the principals and administrators in the urban public schools tend to look upon black boys and girls as only semi-educable, at best. In their view, Latin is a fine subject for the suburban white children but much too difficult for the Afro-American youth of the inner city. Sometimes this view—that the black is only semi-educable at best—is adhered to subconsciously or "off the record." A principal who states for public consumption that Latin is missing in his school for lack of a teacher or for lack of student interest may be hiding the real reason for its absence, viz., his personal belief that it is too difficult for black children. Of course, the absence of Latin is just one aspect of the administrative attitude that black boys and girls are only semi-educable. It is well known that many administrators in inner-city schools content themselves with being wardens and maintaining a modicum of good order; they have almost given up on educating.

Another reason for Latin's absence in the inner-city schools is the difficulty in finding teachers. I do not mean to minimize the seriousness of the teacher shortage, but one sometimes gets the impression that administrators are not really trying in regard to Latin. Imaginative methods of recruitment are not used. Hiring teachers who would travel from school to school to teach one or two classes of Latin in each school is another possibility. Also, part-time teachers or teachers from other fields might be used to make Latin available more widely in the inner-city schools. Also, the help of the many classical associations and professional organizations could be utilized on a long-term basis.

Another problem is the apparent lack of student interest in Latin in the inner-city schools. But is it really reasonable or realistic to expect culturally deprived youngsters to rise up and spontaneously demand Latin? Typically, one finds that the parents in culturally deprived areas have had little formal education and therefore are not really able to advise their children about Latin or—for that matter—about most other academic matters. I am not denigrating the parents but simply pointing out the obligation of the school districts to provide guidance which the parents cannot or do not give. In other words, students

must be shown Latin's values. They must be shown how it widens their cultural horizons, how it acquaints them with great literature, how it builds their knowledge of English, how it prepares them for various professions, etc. Latin's importance is not obvious to a typical culturally disadvantaged youngster. Whenever I hear that Latin is absent in a particular inner-city school for lack of student interest, my answer is that the administration has failed in its responsibility to create interest and thus has shortchanged the boys and girls.

In fairness, it must be stated that there are sincere and unprejudiced people who believe that Latin is low on the list of priorities for the disadvantaged. These people argue that it is more important to teach youngsters how to make a living and how to handle ordinary English. These people tend to view Latin—and the humanities, in general—as a frosting on the intellectual cake. While respecting those who hold this viewpoint, I cannot agree with it. I think that Latin deserves high priority in the inner-city schools and the fact that it has not been given that priority is one of the reasons our slum schools are in such sad shape.

A primary difficulty that disadvantaged youngsters experience is English verbal poverty. They do not read, write, or speak their mother tongue well. But Latin has always been hailed for its ability to increase English vocabulary and facilitate understanding of English grammar and spelling. In fact, there is abundant scientific research that shows conclusively that such is the case. About 60 percent of all the words in the English language are derived from Latin and most of these words are learned or bookish words that one meets in reading. There is no more efficient or effective way to master these words than through a study of Latin roots, prefixes, and suffixes. One might mention also the many Latin words, phrases, and abbreviations that occur commonly in English literature and are frequently a source of mystification to disadvantaged youngsters. Distinctions in grammatical usage and peculiarities in English spelling are much more understandable to the youngster with some Latin background. Even the child's appreciation for the masterpieces of English literature is apt to be improved, since authors such as Milton, Tennyson, Shakespeare, and Chaucer presuppose a familiarity with Greco-Roman literature, mythology, and history. It should be stated that the modern foreign languages are no substitute for Latin as a remedy for English verbal poverty, especially since they are now being taught audio-lingually and with no or little reference to English.

Some might suggest extra periods of English as a remedy for verbal poverty instead of Latin, but there is reason to believe that the lack of English verbal skill is best tackled in several different ways rather than in one way. It is a mistake to try to remedy deficiencies in English solely through English classes.

Those who argue that training for a job is more important than a subject like Latin forget that Latin is a direct preparation for many important fields: medicine, dentistry, biology, the law, the ministry, classical archeology, Romance languages, classical studies, English, and history. Medical terminology and the technical terminology of such sciences as botany and zoology are mostly Latin or Latin derived. It is significant that medical schools recommend or require Latin. Legal terminology is likewise Latin or Latin derived, and the study of Latin helps foster precision in the use of language so important to a lawyer or a legal secretary. Statements recommending Latin from prominent lawyers and law-school deans can be multiplied almost ad infinitum. Indeed, the canard that Latin is no longer important for premedical and prelaw students deserves prompt burial.

Latin has been the medium of expression for Christian theology and philosophy for centuries and, to an extent, still is. The study of Latin gives a prospective clergyman important background on the crucial First Centuries B.C. and A.D. It is no surprise that divinity schools and seminaries recommend or require Latin. Those who plan to work in the area of Romance languages (i.e., the languages derived from that of ancient Rome—chiefly, Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese, and Romanian) will find Latin supremely valuable, since the vocabularies and grammars of these languages are mainly of Latin origin. Latin is also needed in the exciting field of classical archeology, an area which is now capturing the imagination and interest of a wide segment of the public. Latin is, of course, a direct preparation for Latin teaching and the teaching of classical studies, and it should be stressed that there is a great need for Latin teachers at all levels—from elementary through graduate school. We might add that background in Latin is highly esteemed by colleges for admission and scholarship purposes. So Latin does have vocational values, and it seems unfair to deprive ghetto youngsters of these values.

But we must not fail to recognize Latin's cultural values. It would be a grave mistake to view education solely in terms of immediate job training. The boys and girls of the slums need subjects that lift them out of their closed mental universes and narrow existences. They need to be shown the truth and beauty found in the writings of the classical past. They must be shown the treasures of classical literature: Virgil, Cicero, Horace, Livy, Catullus, Plautus, Terence, St. Augustine, Ovid, and others. It should be remembered that some of the Roman world's greatest talents were of African background—St. Augustine, Apuleius, Terence, to mention just a few. Also, Roman literature deals explicitly and excitingly with the exploits of African notables: Hannibal, Jugurtha of Numidia, Cleopatra. In imbuing students with an awareness of the classical roots of Western civilization we can also show them important facets of our African heritage. The black youngster needs to know who he is and where his world came from. If he lacks acquaintance with our Greco-Roman past, he is destined to be—to paraphrase Cicero—always a little child.

The child should know about Greco-Roman thought and accomplishment in such areas as literature, art, architecture, politics, economics, ethics, and philosophy in order to understand the present. It should be pointed out in passing that a study of the moral, esthetic, and sociopolitical problems of the ancient world and the turbulence behind them can create many new insights into present-day problems. Through Latin, a child not only learns about the roots of Western culture, but also the continuation of that culture after the fall of the Roman Empire. It must never be forgotten that Latin literature includes such postclassical authors as Thomas Aquinas, St. Benedict, the secular and religious poets of the Middle Ages, Petrarch, Erasmus, Descartes, Isaac Newton, John XXIII, and a host of others. Is it fair to deny the children the opportunity to share in this great cultural thesaurus?

Latin holds great potential for ghetto students and efforts should be made to make it available to more of them in the junior and senior public high schools. These efforts will have to be made by all interested parties—parents, teachers, administrators, and the general public. The obstacles may be formidable in some cases but *ad astra per aspera.* I am not suggesting that the institution of Latin offerings in the slum schools is a panacea for all their ills, but it certainly would be an important step forward.

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